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CURRENT PROBLEMS IN ALABAMA¹

By HON. JOSEPH B. GRAHAM, Alabama State Attorney

In May of 1902 an informal conference of leading educators in Alabama was held for the purpose of meeting the representatives of the General and Southern Education Boards, Dr. Wallace Buttrick and Mr. Edgar Gardner Murphy. The purposes and plans of the board were made known at that conference and most cordially endorsed by the teachers. Beginning with June the writer made a three months' campaign in various sections of the states, attending commencements where an opportunity might be afforded to talk to the people for the local support of better schools and better qualified teachers, to be better paid. The writer devotes about six months of his time to his duties as prosecuting officer in one of the judicial circles, composed of six counties of the state of Alabama, the rest of the time being given to the work of the Southern Education Board. This recalls that the first day of circuit court in a rural county in Alabama is a great day, when citizens from every section of the county come up to the county seat, some as jurors, witnesses and litigants, some to swap horses and tobacco, but many just to greet friends, talk politics and to get and distribute the news in general. These first days have been used largely by the office-seekers and politicians for getting office and promoting patriotism (?). I have endeavored to utilize these occasions in talking of good schools, sounder morals, and higher and purer aims; and, if I mistake not the sentiment of the people, I believe that they appreciate the change.

I have visited twenty-two counties, and have delivered from one to four addresses in each county within the eleven months of my service. My work and speeches have been along the line of stimulating the people to self-reliance and to the local support of their schools, looking ultimately to free public schools supported by local taxation with the district as the unit. In my opinion every dollar, the giving of which is felt and is to some extent a sacrifice upon the part of the person making the contribution, whether vol-

¹ EDITORIAL NOTE —Probably no educational workers in the country are so familiar with the details of conditions in the Southern school system as the special field agents who have been appointed by the Southern Education Board to conduct its campaign. By the courtesy of the Board a number of these reports are here printed in condensed form.

untary or under form of law, consecrated to the cause of public education, is worth more to the contributor and to the growth of genuine patriotism than a hundred dollars which may come unmerited or unappreciated, or from misdirected philanthropy.

As an instance of the interest of our rural population in our educational progress, and of the character of my field work, I recall one day in July during the severe drouth which almost destroyed the cotton and corn crops of Alabama last year. It was in a mountain county about twenty-five miles from a railroad. There was an all-day educational rally, with an abundance of substantial "dinner on the ground," notwithstanding the blight then resting on the burning, thirsty fields. The people came in great numbers from the surrounding country. Many walked, some rode in good buggies and surreys; but many families of from three to twelve persons came in plain farm wagons with straw-covered beds, chairs from the fireside as seats, drawn by a yoke of oxen. Many of them were clad in home-woven jeans and cotton; most of them wore shoes, but some, even adults, were barefooted; but all were happy and cheerful and welcomed visiting speakers most cordially. Many speeches were made during the day along educational lines, and the young and old seemed to be inspired to do and hope for better things for the youth of the land. I went the same afternoon to another place ten miles distant, where a protracted meeting was in progress. They were having morning service at 11 o'clock and evening service at 7.30. They heard of my visit and the evening sermon was delivered at "early candlelight," 6.30 o'clock, and everything was in readiness for me at 8 p. m.

The speeches made by two other visitors and myself had earnest attention for more than two hours, and they were so pitched along the line of close relation of home, school and church, and of intelligence, morals and religion, that even the hesitating preacher declared to his congregation just before the benediction that they had just heard the best sermons of the revival.

On the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth of January we held a conference of county superintendents in Montgomery. Of the sixty-six superintendents in the state, sixty were in attendance and five were providentially detained at home. The Alabama legislature was in session, and almost every member was in attendance at the two great mass-meetings held in the evenings. Many of the

prominent educators and citizens of the state, including the very best citizenship of the capital city, were also present. This conference, for power and widespread influence among educators, citizens and legislators, was far beyond anything in the history of the state, and has brought our best citizenship into thorough sympathy with the work of the two great Education Boards.

We have a new organic law which guarantees the rights and protection of citizenship to all, but restricts the privilege of suffrage to only those who contribute either of their intelligence to the good of society, or of taxes for the material support of the government. Recognizing the power of intelligence as a factor in the creation of wealth, more than one-half of the entire income of the state has been set aside as a trust fund for the education of the youth of the state, and the legislature is instructed to make additional appropriations when the revenues and collections shall justify.

For the first time in the history of our commonwealth, the principle and privilege of local taxation for public school purposes are recognized in the organic law. It is true that the unit is the county and one mill the limit, while the ideal unit is the district and the will of the people the limit, still all must agree that ours is better than no unit and no rate at all. If I mistake not the sentiment of the people in the counties which I have visited, they will vote to levy the one mill tax at the first opportunity.

My future work will be largely in assisting the educational forces in several counties in campaigns for the levying of the one mill tax.

The doctrine of local taxation is becoming popular and is going to win in Alabama, although our public school system has been in existence only about fifty years and has had but small financial support until the past fifteen years. Our rural white schools averaged one hundred and five days and our rural colored schools averaged ninety-three days, free terms, during the last scholastic year.

Be it said to the credit of Alabama, that, although her people are comparatively poor, though she has in common with other Southern states suffered the disasters of war and borne the burdens and sacrifices of reconstruction, and though forty-four per cent of her population belongs to a race which pays but little more than five per cent of the taxes, still our new organic law forbids that dis-

crimination inspired by prejudice which would restrict the educational privileges and rights of a particular class or race according to its contribution in taxes for the support of the government. This equality of benefits did not arise from any cringing fear of federal amendments, but from a spontaneous philanthropy too generous to take advantage of the poor, and a sense of right and humanity too proud to stoop to wrong an inferior race.

In my opinion, the highest and sincerest expression of the principle of fraternity and the most splendid prophecy of the permanence and high standard of our future civilization are to be found at one and the same time in the willingness of the people, through honest government, to make liberal contribution for free public schools for the education of all the people.